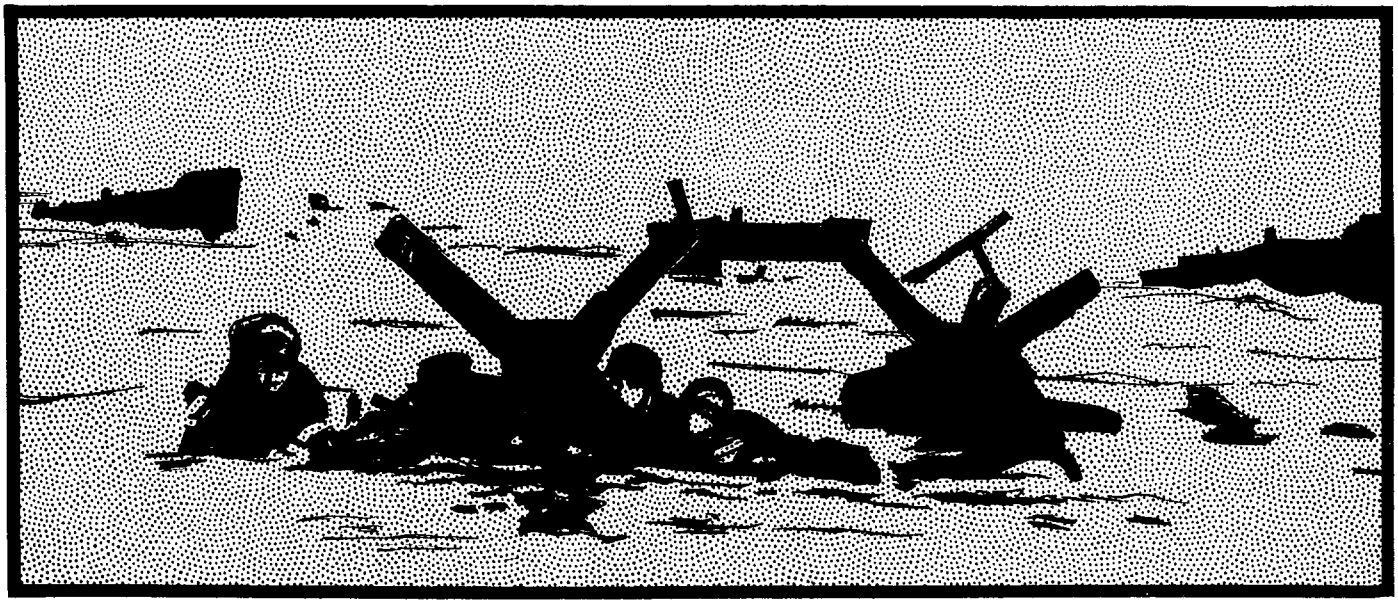


INFANTRYMEN IN ACTION

D-DAY LANDING, 6 JUNE 1944

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is an account of the actions of the 1st Assault Section of Company E, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division on 6 June 1944, taken from an interview found in the National Archives. The text of that interview, presented here with only minor editing, is introduced by Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr., U.S. Army Retired, who commanded Company L of the same regiment in the D-Day assault. General Smith also served with the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam and was Honorary Colonel of the 16th Infantry Regiment from December 1983 until May 1990.

INTRODUCTION

Until the United States entered World War II in December 1941, our Allies had little cause for optimism. After Germany's invasions of Norway and Denmark in April 1940, its Blitzkrieg across the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France in May 1940, and its invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, most of Europe and North Africa was either in Axis hands or the scene of bitter fighting. The tide of the German advance into the Soviet Union would not be turned for another 18 months, and then only in counteroffensives that were to cost millions of military and civilian casualties.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941—intended to cripple our Pacific Fleet and undermine the American will to engage in war with Japan—produced two results the Japanese had not anticipated: It strengthened U.S. resolve and gave hope to her Allies that the nation's entire industrial and military might would soon be turned against the Axis powers. A joint German-Italian declaration of war against the United States on 11 December 1941 further clarified the course the U.S. and her Allies would follow for the next four years. President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill dedicated their combined resources to defeating first the Germans in Europe, and then the Japanese in Asia.

The first step toward achieving the ultimate goal of victory was to concentrate American men, women, and materiel in Great Britain, and the U.S. 1st Infantry Division was one of the first units sent overseas.

For the Big Red One, World War II began on board the liner Queen Mary—converted into a troop transport—as she sailed from the port of New York on 2 August 1942 bound for the British Isles. She sailed alone, relying on her speed of more than 30 knots for the ability to evade the U-boats that haunted the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic. On board were 16,000 U.S. soldiers and their individual equipment.

After safely arriving in England and completing a year of arduous training there and in Scotland—and after a 2,200-mile sea voyage—the regiments of the division seized Oran, Algeria, in an amphibious assault launched on 8 November 1942. That three-day operation was followed by successful campaigns in Tunisia and Sicily. As a result, the 1st Infantry Division that sailed back to England in late October 1943 was now a battle-hardened fighting force that had proved itself against some of the best units of the Wehrmacht.

By the spring of 1944, plans had been made and orders issued for the Normandy invasion (Operation OVERLORD). Major General C.R. Huebner—Commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division—was chosen to command the 34,000-man task force aimed at Omaha Beach (Map 1). The 16th Infantry Regiment, one of two regiments designated to lead

the assault, would land on the left (north) end of Omaha Beach with two battalions abreast at H-Hour (0630)—2d Battalion on the right and 3d Battalion on the left (Map 2). On the extreme right flank of the 2d Battalion was Company E, 16th Infantry, commanded by Captain Ed Wozenski.

This brings us to the focus of this article:

On 1 May 1944, Second Lieutenant John Spaulding, Technical Sergeant Philip Streczyk, and the 1st Assault Section of Company E, 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, moved into their holding area, an austere tent encampment several miles inland from Weymouth, on the south coast of England. A month later, they were aboard an attack transport—the USS Henrico, APA45—with its landing craft (LCVPs) preparing for the cross-channel assault.

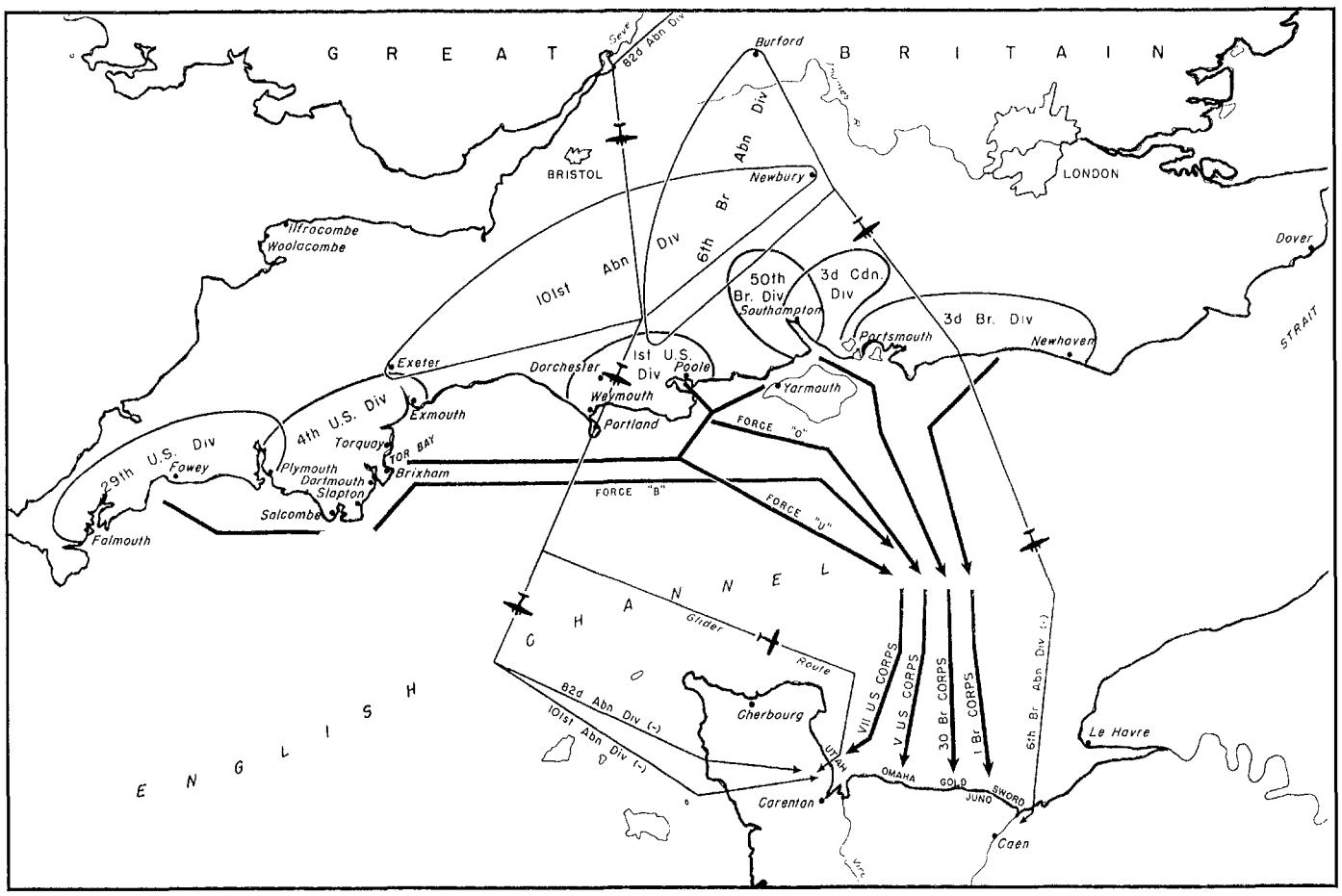
The following is Lieutenant Spaulding's recollection of the events on 6 June 1944, as recorded in a February 1945 interview in Belgium with noted historian Forrest C. Pogue (then a master sergeant in V Corps), who even today recalls this as the best of his many World War II interviews with combat veterans.

Lieutenant Spaulding's account is particularly relevant for today's soldiers and junior leaders, because it is a classic story of infantrymen in action, a detailed description of the wondrous things a junior officer, his noncommissioned officers, and his soldiers accomplished 50 years ago. In all the accounts of heroic deeds performed on D-Day, none has surpassed that of the 1st Assault Section, Company E, 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry. Here is that story, in Lieutenant Spaulding's own words:

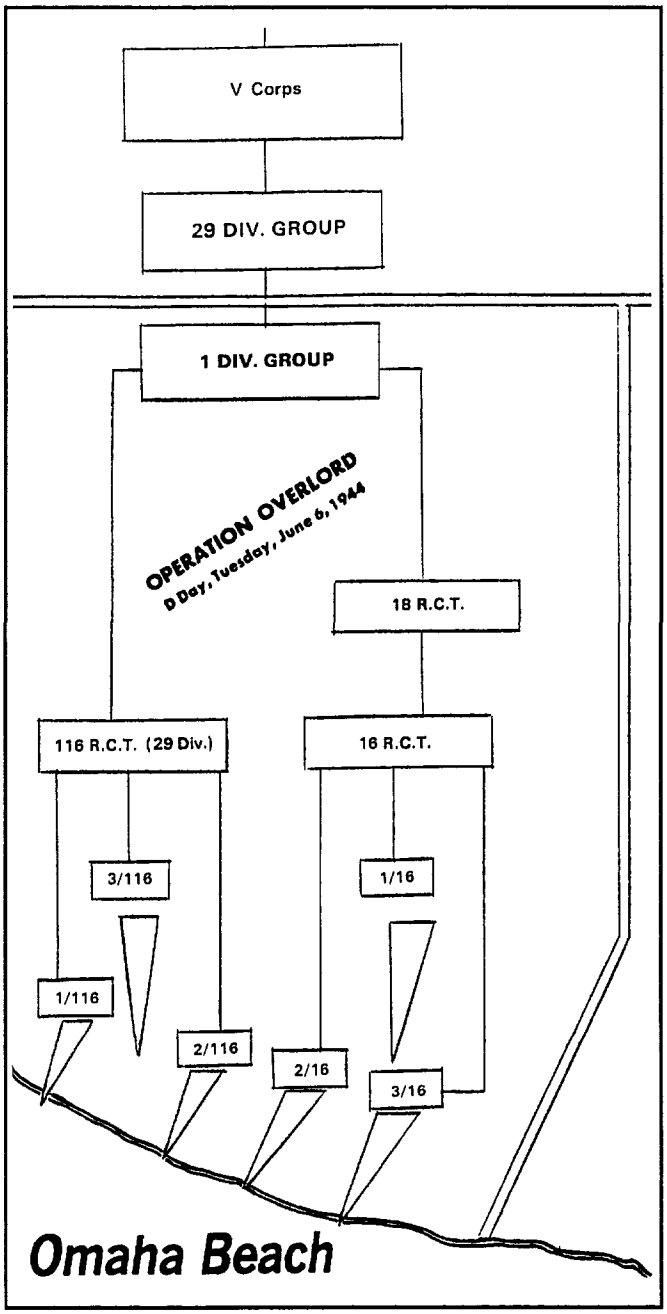
We loaded into LCVPs from larger ships at 0300, 6 June 1944. The companies were divided into sections, and each LCVP had 32 men—including a medic—plus two Navy men. I was the leader of the 1st Section of Company E, and we were scheduled to go in on the first wave. My assistant section leader was Technical Sergeant Philip Streczyk. (Streczyk, later wounded in the Huertgen Forest action, was the best soldier I have ever seen. He came into the Army as a selectee and worked his way up to platoon sergeant. He was in on the landings at Oran and in Sicily. If we had more men like him, the war would soon be over.)

We unloaded into LCVPs in a very rough sea. It took us much longer to load than it had during the practice landings because of the rough water. After boarding the LCVPs, we went an undetermined distance to a rendezvous point. Here the Navy crew took us around and around, getting us soaked to the skin. Many of the men got seasick immediately, and others got sick as we moved towards shore.

About 0400 our boats lined up in a V-formation and headed in. As we went towards shore we could see the outlines of other boats around us, and overhead we could hear a few planes. Between 0545 and 0600 we saw the first flashes from the shore. We didn't know whether the flashes were from our planes bombing, as we had been told to expect, or from German artillery. We caught sight of the shore about 0615.



Map 1



Map 2

We also saw a few of our fighter planes. About 0630 the rocket ships began to fire, but most of their rockets hit in the water.

In the meantime, the Navy had been firing, and the dust from the debris—combined with the early morning mist—made it difficult to see the coast.

As we came in, there was considerable noise from the shore and the sea. Enroute, we passed several yellow rubber boats; they had personnel in them, but we didn't know who they were. They turned out to be the crews of amphibious tanks that had foundered.

About 800 to 1,000 yards out, we began receiving ineffective machinegun fire from the shore. As we neared the shore, we reached the line of departure; here the odd-numbered boats swung out abreast on one side, while the even-numbered boats went to the other side. We approached the beach in this formation.

Our instructions were to land just to the right of a house identified by location and coordinates, which was to be the left boundary of my position. We were to cross an antitank ditch near the point designated E-1 (Map 3) and scale the seawall. Once we had done this, we were to send patrols into St. Laurent, to link up with E Company of the 2d Battalion, 116th Infantry, which was supposed to land on our right flank, and then push on to the high ground behind the town. According to plan, the air force was to have destroyed the beach defenses by this time, enabling us to land without any great opposition.

We hit the line of departure at around 0630, someone gave the signal, and we swung into line. When we were about 200 yards offshore the LCVP halted, and a Navy crewman yelled for us to drop the ramp. Staff Sergeant Fred A. Bisco and I kicked the ramp down. Meanwhile, the other Navy crewman on the LCVP had mounted a machinegun on the rear of the craft and had started to return fire. By now were beginning to receive not only machinegun fire but mortar and artillery fire as well. Some of the men said they were German 88mm rounds, but during my entire fight in Europe I have only seen three 88mm bursts.

We had come in at low tide and the obstacles were visible, sticking out of the water, and we could see teller mines on many of them. No path had been cleared through the obstacles, so we followed a zigzag path in to the beach. It is difficult to know whether the Navy could have taken the boats in any farther, since it is possible that they would have become stuck on the sand bars.

Because we were carrying so much equipment, and because I was afraid we were being landed in deep water, I told the men not to jump out until I had tested the water. I jumped out of the boat slightly to the left of the ramp, into water about waist deep. By then it was about 0645. Then the men began to follow me. We headed for shore, and the small arms fire became noticeable. We saw other boats to our left, but none to our right. We were the right front unit of the 1st Infantry Division. We had seen some tanks coming in, but we didn't know which unit they belonged to.

As we left the LCVP, we spread out in a V-formation about 50 yards across. The water soon became deeper, and we began to swim when it was over our heads. There was a strong undercurrent carrying us to the left. I pulled the valve on my lifebelt; fortunately it inflated and saved me, although I lost my carbine. We lost none of our men, but only because they helped each other, or because they got rid of their equipment.

About this time, Sergeant Streczyk and Private George Bowen—the medic—were also in the water, carrying an 18-foot ladder, intended to assist in crossing the anti-tank ditch or any other obstacle. They were struggling with it just as I was having the worst time trying to stay afloat. As the ladder came by I grabbed it. Streczyk yelled, "Lieutenant, we don't need any help!" not realizing that I was trying to get help, not give it! I told them to leave the ladder, so we aban-

doned it in the water. By now, we could touch bottom and I had swallowed a lot of water. We pulled out Sergeant Edwin Piasecki, who was about to drown. Private First Class (PFC) Vincent DiGaetano—who was carrying a 72-pound flamethrower—yelled "I'm drowning; what do you want me to do with this flamethrower?" Streczyk told him to drop it, so he did. In addition to our flamethrower and many personal weapons, we lost our mortar, most of the mortar ammunition, one of our two bazookas, and much of the bazooka ammunition. However, those men who made it to shore with their weapons were able to fire them as soon as they hit the beach, proving that the M-1 Garand is an excellent weapon.

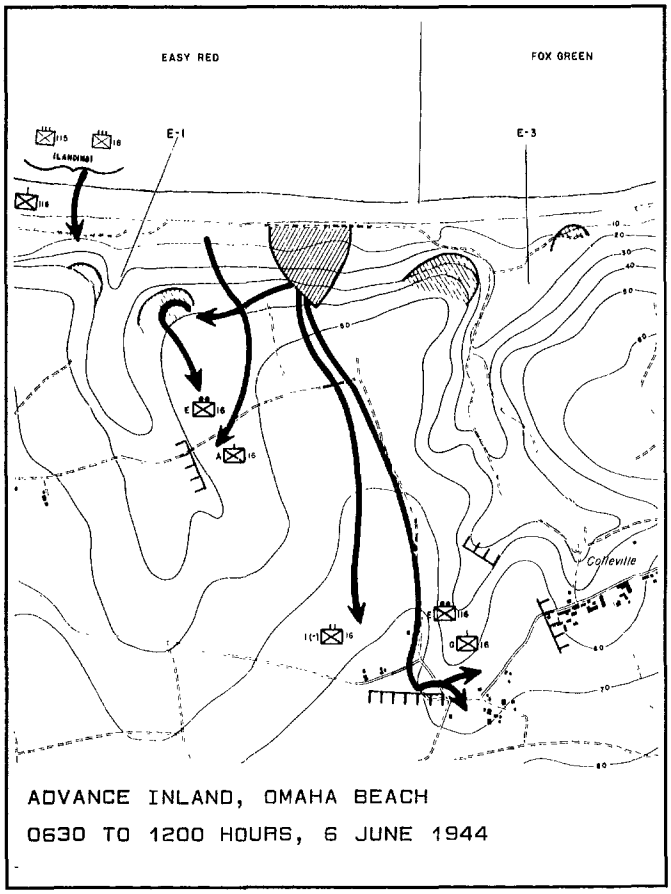
As we were coming in, I looked at the terrain and saw a house that looked like the one we were supposed to hit, and said "Damn, the Navy has hit it right on the nose!" I later found out that we had actually landed near another house 1,500 yards to the east of our intended landing site. (One reason the Navy crew failed to hit the right part of the beach was that the dust created by the Naval gunfire—combined with the early morning mist—made it difficult to see the coast.)

We first ran into wire down near the water's edge; Staff Sergeant Curtis Colwell blew a hole in the wire with a bangalore torpedo, and we picked our way through. I personally didn't see the gap he had blown, because I was still dazed from the landing. I didn't see any mines except antitank mines on the beach. Private William C. Roper, a rifleman, became our first casualty when he was hit in the foot by small arms fire just as he reached the beach. Then, just after we got ashore, one of my two BAR (Browning automatic rifle) men was hit; next wounded was PFC Virgil Tilley, struck in the right shoulder by a shell fragment. By this time, I noticed a number of my men on the beach, all standing up and moving across the sand. They were too waterlogged to run, but they went as fast as they could; it looked as if they were walking in the face of a really strong wind. We moved straight inland across the shale beach, toward the house we had spotted.

We first stopped at a demolished building with brush around it. We were forced to halt there by a minefield at the first slope off the beach. My section was spread out; they had deployed the minute they hit the beach, according to instructions. They had been told to get off the beach as quickly as possible and had walked on across because nobody had stopped them.

As we were crossing the beach, my runner—PFC Bruce S. Buck—approached me, and I tried to contact E Company using my 536 radio; I extended the antenna and was trying to transmit when I saw that the mouthpiece had been shot away. Instead of discarding the useless radio, I folded the antenna and slung the 536 over my shoulder, proof that the habits you learn in training can often stay with you even when you are scared.

By the time we reached the house, we were receiving heavy small arms fire; we organized as skirmishers and were returning what fire we could. Sergeant Streczyk and PFC Richard J. Gallagher advanced to investigate the minefield we had discovered to our front. They decided we couldn't cross the obstacle, and set out to find a bypass through the



Map 3

thick brush. Meanwhile, the rest of us were taking cover behind a low wall of the house, while a German machinegun kept us under fire. PFC Lewis J. Ramundo was killed here—the only man in my section killed on the beach. One other man was killed later in the day.

On our left, we had bypassed a pillbox, from which machinegun fire was mowing down F Company people several hundred yards away. There was nothing we could do to help them, since we still could see no one on our right flank, and there was no one to help us on our left. We still didn't know what had become of the rest of E Company. Behind us, boats in the water were in flames, and I saw a tank come ashore around 0745. After a couple of looks behind us, we decided not to look back anymore.

At this point, it was still early morning, and in spite of heavy German rifle and machinegun fire, we had sustained few casulaties. We returned fire, but without apparent effect. We were nearly at the top of the first hill off the beach when PFC Gallagher returned and said to follow him up a defilade about 400 yards to the right of the pillbox that was impeding F Company's advance. I called my men forward, and we cautiously moved along the defile, keeping our eyes open for the little box mines the Germans had planted throughout the area. We made it through without mishap, but a few hours later H Company sustained several casualties while moving through the same area. The Lord was with us on that one.

A machinegun above us took us under fire, and Sergeant Blades attempted to knock it out with a bazooka; he missed,

and was shot in the left arm almost immediately. PFC Curley, a rifleman, was the next man hit. When PFC Tilley was wounded shortly after landing, Staff Sergeant Phelps had picked up his BAR and now attempted to engage the machinegun; he was soon hit in both legs. By now, nearly all of my section had moved up, and when we rushed the gun the lone crewman threw up his hands and yelled "Kamerad!" We could have easily killed him, but since we needed prisoners for interrogation I ordered the men not to shoot him. He said that he was Polish, that there were 16 Germans in the area, and that they had been alerted that morning. He added that their orders were to hold the beach. They had taken a vote on whether to fight and had decided against it, but the German noncommissioned officers had forced them to remain in their positions. He also said that there were 16 Germans in the trench to the rear of his machinegun, and that he had not fired on any Americans, although I had seen him hit three.

I left Sergeant Blades—who had been wounded in the assault—in charge of the prisoner, guarding him with a trench knife. We moved our wounded into a defile and Private Bowen, the medic, gave them First Aid. He covered his whole section of the beach that day; no man waited more than five minutes for First Aid, and his actions did a lot to help morale. He later received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on D-Day.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Clarence Colson, who had picked up a BAR on the beach, moved along the crest of the hill, firing from the hip. He engaged the machinegun on our right, firing so rapidly that his ammunition carrier had difficulty keeping him supplied with ammunition. We were on top of the hill by 0900; advancing cautiously. We were the first platoon of the 16th Infantry to hit the top. By now my section was down to 21 or 22 men. We had spent more time in the rubble of the house at the foot of the hill than anywhere else, and had also lost time in the capture and interrogation of the prisoner.

At about 0800, Lieutenant Blue of G Company came up and contacted me; he had followed our trail after his company had landed in the second wave behind us. A few minutes later, the commander of G Company—Captain Dawson—came along and asked me if I knew where E Company was. Since I still had seen no one on our right, I told him I didn't know. He said that E Company was 500 yards to my right, but he was thinking in terms of where they were supposed to land; as it turned out, they were actually 500 to 800 yards to our left instead. I later found out that E Company had lost 121 men. Captain Dawson said that he was going into Colleville, and told us to go in to the right. He had about two sections of men with him at that time.

I went over and talked to Lieutenant Blue about the information we had gotten from the prisoner, and asked him to give us some support where the 16 Germans were supposed to be. Moving in that direction, we soon ran into a wooded area and discovered a beautifully camouflaged trench that ran along in a zigzag fashion. We were afraid to go into the trench, but instead moved along the top of it, spraying it with small arms fire. We used bullets instead of grenades because we had very few grenades and thought that bullets would be more effective anyway. We did not fix bayonets at any time during the attack. We turned to the right and hit a wooded area; since we drew no fire from there, we yelled to Lieutenant Blue to move out, and he started for Colleville. We moved toward St. Laurent; G Company went on to Colleville; and H Company arrived and went into Colleville under Lieutenant Shelby.

Our men were spread out over an area 100 to 500 yards wide, and Streczyk and Gallagher volunteered to scout the area to our front. They located a machinegunner flanked by two riflemen, and when Streczyk shot the gunner, the riflemen surrendered. Both of the prisoners refused to give any information. We continued to the west with them in tow. Meeting no resistance, we were soon in hedgerows and orchard country. Watching our flanks and front, we scoured the wooded area, sending one sergeant and three or four men to check out suspicious areas. Although we usually set up an automatic weapon to cover such areas, we did not have any machineguns at this time. We crossed two minefields, one of which had a path through it that looked like it had been in use for a long time. We first saw the *Achtung—Minen!* sign after we got through this minefield; we still had an angel on our shoulder.

We now found a construction shack near the strongpoint overlooking the E-1 draw. If you examine the defense overlay, you will find an almost exact duplicate of what we saw. Sergeant Kenneth Peterson fired his bazooka into the shack, but no one came out. We were about to move on when I spied a piece of stovepipe sticking out of the ground about 70 yards away. By now we were once again receiving small arms fire, so I formed my section into a semicircular defensive position, and Sergeant Streczyk and I went forward to investigate. We found an underground dugout and an 81mm mortar emplacement, a position for an antitank gun, and construction for a pillbox. All this overlooked the E-1 draw (as shown on the map). The 81mm was not manned, but it had beautiful range cards and lots of ammunition. The dugout was constructed of cement and had radios, excellent sleeping facilities, and guard dogs.

We started to drop a grenade into the ventilator pipe, but Streczyk said "Hold on a minute," and fired three shots into the dugout. He then yelled in Polish and German—he had interrogated the prisoner earlier—for the occupants to come out; four unarmed men came out, carrying two or three wounded. I yelled for Colson to bring a squad forward just as we began receiving small arms fire from our right flank, off to the west. I yelled for Piasecki and Sakowski to move forward to the edge of the draw, and a firefight ensued. By then, it was about 1000, and the Navy began placing time fire into the draw. In the course of the firefight, Piasecki deployed six or seven men, shot several Germans, and chased the rest into the draw, where the naval gunfire caught them.

When Colson came over I started down the line of communications trenches leading to the cliff over the beach. We were now behind the Germans, so we routed four out of a hole and got 13 in the trenches. The trenches had teller

nines, hundreds of grenades, and numerous machineguns, and they were firing when we came up. We turned the prisoners over to Streczyk. We had had a short fight with the 13 men; they threw three grenades at us, but didn't hit anyone. We found one dead man in the trenches but don't know if we killed him. If we did, he was the only German we killed. Several of us went on to check the trenches.

At this point, I did a foolish thing. I had picked up a German rifle after losing my carbine in the water, but found I didn't know how to use it too well. When I started to check on the trenches, I traded the German rifle for a soldier's carbine but failed to check it. I soon ran into a German and pulled the trigger, but the safety was on. I reached for the safety catch and hit the clip release instead, so my clip hit the ground. I ran about 50 yards in nothing flat. Fortunately, Sergeant Peterson had me covered, and the German put up his hands. That business of not checking guns is certainly not habit forming.

We next took out an AT gun near the edge of the draw. There was little resistance. We now had the prisoners back near the dugout. We had split the section into three units. From the draw to the right, we got a little ineffective machinegun fire at this time. We tried to use the German 81mm mortar, but no one could operate it. For the first time, I saw people across the draw to the right (west). I supposed that they were from the 116th. They seemed to be pinned down.

About this time, two stragglers from the 116th Infantry came up. I didn't ask what company they were from but just took them along. We went back and checked trenches since we were afraid of infiltration by the Germans. In the meantime I sent the 17 to 19 German prisoners back with two men the way we had come. I told the men to turn the prisoners over to anyone who would take them and to ask about our company.

At this point I saw Lieutenant Hutch of Company E (second section which had been directly to my left in the boats) coming up. I pointed out a minefield to him, and he told me that there was a sniper near me. We had sniper fire every few feet now and were getting pretty jittery. The Navy's time fire was getting very close, too, and we sent off our last yellow smoke grenade to let them know we were Americans.

About 1045 Captain Wozenski of Company E came up from the left. He had come along practically the same route we had used. I was very happy to see him. We had orders to contact Major Washington, 2d Battalion executive officer, just outside Colleville. Our objective was changed; there were to be no patrols into Trevieres that afternoon as we had originally been told there would be. We never crossed the E-1 draw. Instead, we went along the trail toward Colleville. We were to swing into the fields to the right of Colleville. Lieutenant Hutch and I had about 30 men; as a first lieutenant, he was in charge. Lieutenant James McGourty had also come up with Captain Wozenski. Three of our section leaders had been killed on the beach; Hutch, McGourty, and I were here together.

We ran into Major Washington; he was in a ditch outside town. Earlier, Captain Dawson had come up to Colleville, his original objective. G Company was already in and around the town. We got some small-arms fire in this area, but no one was hit. Lieutenant Hutch and I contacted Major Washington about 1300. He told us we were to go to the right of Colleville and guard the right flank of the town. We went out and were surrounded in about 40 minutes. Lieutenant Knuckus of G Company, with about 14 men, came up and said he had the right flank, so we reinforced him. Altogether, Hutch, Knuckus, and I had about 45 men.

We had set up our defensive position to the west of Colleville. We selected a position where no digging was necessary, often using drainage ditches. We were now in orchards and hedgerows. We moved cautiously, because we didn't know where anybody was. About 1500 we got German fire. DiGaetano was hit by shrapnel fire, and Sergeant Bisco was killed by rifle fire. Only one round of artillery came in (we thought it was from one of our ships). It exploded about 300 yards from us with an orange and yellow flash.

As we looked back toward the beach, we saw several squads of Germans coming toward us, and we had no contact with the battalion. Just as a Company G runner started over to us and got to the edge of our defenses, they opened fire on him. After he fell, they fired at least 100 rounds of machinegun ammunition into him. It was terrible. But we do the same thing when we want to stop a runner from taking information. Of course, we didn't find out what he was coming to tell us. We fired until we were low on ammunition that afternoon. I had six rounds of carbine ammunition left—some of the soldiers were down to their last clip—and we were still surrounded. We called a meeting of Lieutenants Knuckus and Hutch, Technical Sergeants Ellis and Streczyk, and me. About 1700 we decided to fight our way back to the battalion. We sent word for the men to come to us in the ditch where we were, several hundred yards south and west of Colleville.

About 1900 or 2000 we set up automatic weapons to cover us as we crawled down the ditch back toward Colleville. Lieutenant Hutch went in front. We got back to battalion and ran into Company C of the 16th Infantry on the way to reinforce us. We didn't know where we were. We found Major Washington in a little gully at the west of town. He said we were to go back to about the same point with Company C in support. We took up a defensive position 500 to 700 yards from our original positions—this was closer to Colleville. We were still in hedgerows and astride enemy avenues of approach. I think part of the company area bordered on the roads into Colleville. We now had machineguns (I believe they were from Company H). By now it was about 2100, nearly dark. It was quiet except for some aerial activity.

We spent the night of the first day in the positions near Colleville. We had been in almost constant contact with the enemy since we hit the beach.

Of the section, two men were killed on D-Day—PFC Ramundo on the beach and Sergeant Bisco later. Eight were wounded. Five men got DSCs, which were later awarded by General Dwight Eisenhower.